



What Good Is a Savior Who Needs a Second Chance?

TEXT
Mark 8:22–25

October 23, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

It happened a couple of weeks ago. I was standing outside at a graveside, as I often do, and I was wearing a black suit, as I often do. (That last detail is more important it seems right now.) I was standing with a dozen family members, waiting to say the holy words. There were a few more folks still left to arrive, so no one had yet settled into the rows of chairs.

I was crossing a few feet of grass when it happened: a strange weight and pressure around my right leg. Surprised, I looked down, and locked eyes with a four-year-old girl who was equally surprised. She thought she had wrapped her arms around her *mother's* black-suited-leg. She thought she had wrapped her arms around comfort and familiarity and maternal love. She thought she had wrapped her arms around safety and security, when in fact she had wrapped her arms around a total stranger. I was not the pant leg she thought I was. Her eyes grew a bit wider and they welled up with tears. “Where’d my mommy go?” she said. “And who are YOU?”

I felt a little bit like that the first five or six dozen times I read today’s scripture passage. For the first eight chapters, Mark tells

us the story of the Messiah, the Son of God: a guy who makes demons run for the hills and makes storms stop in their tracks, a guy who makes paralyzed men stand up and walk, a guy who makes a little girl wake up from a deadly nap, a guy powerful enough to heal a woman without even realizing it, simply because she touched the clothes he was wearing. Of Mark’s 678 verses, nearly a third of those verses are about Jesus working miracles like these. Sometimes, the way Mark tells the story, Jesus is on his way to go perform a miracle, and he gets interrupted by someone else needing a miracle.

But then, in the midst of all of that, there’s this story, where he needs two tries to restore a blind man’s sight. That seems a little out of character. So where’d my all-powerful, miracle-working Jesus go, and who is this guy? In a world that sometimes seems to be on the fast track toward destruction and despair, what good is a savior who needs a second chance to get the job done?

I’ve told you before that right after college, I taught Outdoor Education in California. Every week, sixth graders from Los Angeles would come up into the mountains to learn about trees and birds and conservation

and rock climbing and all sorts of things. My favorite class to teach was Outdoor Survival. The very first thing we did with our class was take them on a very, very long hike, during which we would lead them to believe we had accidentally gotten very, very lost. Then, we’d teach them what to do. How to survive when you are unsure in unfamiliar territory. The first step is to always stop moving, and look around. Take in your surroundings. Pay attention to the details. It turns out that’s good advice for reading scripture, too, when the Word of our God seems confusing or misleading. Look around and see what happens right before a particular story, or right after it. So let’s try that.

Do you remember the feeding of the five thousand? It happens not long before this morning’s story. In chapter six — you can follow along if you like — Jesus and his disciples try to get away from the crowds. But when you are doing all the things that Jesus is doing, crowds grow everywhere you go. So he gathers the people around and begins to teach them. At some point the disciples come up alongside of him and, probably prompted by the growling of their own stomachs, they point out that it is well

past dinnertime. “You should let them go,” the disciples say. “Send them away so they can find something to eat.”

Jesus pauses, and then he says, “How about you take care of it. You feed them.” They look helplessly at Jesus. “How exactly would you suggest we do that,” they tentatively ask. So he shows them. He’s a teacher, after all. “How much bread do you have? And how about fish?” They assemble five loaves and two fish, and he says, “Feed them with this.”

You know how it ends. Despite absolutely impossible mathematics and home economics, everyone eats, and there are even baskets of leftovers to collect. “Huh,” the disciples say. “How about that?” And they go on their way.

Now the way Mark tells it, it’s just a handful of verses later that there is once again a great crowd gathered around Jesus. He calls his disciples over and says — tell me if this starts to sound familiar — he says, “They’ve been with me for three days, and no one has anything to eat. If I send them out to find their own food, they will faint along the way.” His disciples reply back, “Well, what do you want us to do about it?” Jesus gives them a long look and manages not to say, “Seriously? Didn’t we just go over this?” Instead, he says, again, “How much bread do you have? And how about fish?” And this time with seven loaves and a few fish, everyone eats, and there are even baskets of leftovers to collect. “Huh,” the disciples say. “How

about that?” And they go on their way.

This time it’s just two verses later. Jesus and his disciples are finally alone together. They’ve gotten a little bit of breathing space by getting in a boat together, and this is what the gospel tells us: “The disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; they only had one loaf with them in the boat.”

Realizing this, they say, bless their hearts, the disciples say, “Uh oh. We don’t have enough. What are we going to eat?” And Jesus, well, he just narrowly avoids beating his own head against the side of the boat as he says, “Are you kidding me? How are you possibly still talking about not having enough bread? Do you still not get it? Are your hearts impossible? Do your eyes not see? Do your ears not hear? Do you not remember? When I broke five loaves for five thousand, what happened? Leftovers! When I broke seven loaves for four thousand, what happened? Leftovers! And you still don’t understand?”

It’s not really the best moment for the Son of God. But what follows might be.

He encounters a blind man who wants to see again. It’s the story Sandy/Hoyl/Ruth read. (I know, you thought I forgot about it after all this time, didn’t you?) The blind man wants to see again. So Jesus puts spit on his eyes and says, “Can you see anything?” And the man says, “A little. I see people, but they look like trees walking around.” Jesus touches the man a second time. “How about now,” he says.

This time, finally, the man sees clearly.

All on its own, this story makes no sense. A blind man, trees with feet on them, and a savior who needs a second chance. But if we read it smacked right up against all those feeding stories, right up against all those stories of the disciples’ failure, it becomes some of the best good news the gospel has to offer.

Just the other day, I was talking with a friend. She was explaining something to me, and at one point she said to me, “You see what I mean?” You know where this is going. There wasn’t anything for me to physically see. She was asking me, “Do you understand what I’m saying? Do you get it?”

Jesus takes more than one try to heal the blind man’s eyes not because he’s suddenly weak or impotent. He takes more than one try because he *really is* a good teacher, and it *really is* nothing less than a miraculous moment. Because it is in that moment that he is saying, “Yes, I will help you see. I will help you understand. No matter how many tries it takes. No matter how often you fail to understand who I am and what I can do and what that means. I will touch your eyes once or I will touch your eyes twice. I will touch your eyes as often as it takes until you see. Until you really see.”

Put it another way and it’s Jesus saying, “I will not give up on you. No matter what. No matter how much the evidence suggests that maybe I should, I will not give up.”

Thanks be to God for that, right? Friends, on my worst days, I cling to this story the way a drowning woman clings to a life preserver. For there is a good pastoral word in here. And I hope you will cling to this story, too, in moments when life is hard, in moments when you can only assume God has finally labeled you a lost cause. Hang on to this story and remember the blind man. Remember that Jesus refuses to give up on you.

But right now, I have to tell you, I cannot help but think this is a story we as a church and we as a country need even more desperately as a collective people. I have to believe that Jesus will not give up on us as a human race. I have to believe that Jesus won't, because — can I be honest? — sometimes I'm tempted to.

As a woman and as a pastor, I have been horrified over and over these last few weeks by the way women have been degraded and demeaned in our national conversation. When bragging about sexual assault and sexual harassment is brushed away as locker room talk, when it is chalked up to boys being boys ... it makes me want to give up.

Have you heard that after the tape of that conversation aired, the country's biggest sexual assault hotline jumped 33 percent over one weekend? The executive director said they have had to bring in additional staff, and ask other staff to work longer hours. Too many people are calling in distress over memories unearthed or with experiences of verbal and physical sexual assault finally being voiced.¹

And have you heard about the writer Kelly Oxford? Before the second presidential debate took place, she Tweeted about her first experience of sexual assault and asked other women to do the same. "You are not a statistic," she wrote. "You are a story." In responses of only 140 characters or less, because that's all Twitter allows, over 8.5 million women have said, "This happened to me, too."²

And while it has been especially prominent these weeks, it is not limited to these weeks. This is the year of Brock Turner. This is the year of Baylor University. This is the year of Nate Parker. This is the year that *Teen Vogue* — *Teen Vogue* — began printing self-care tips for survivors of sexual assault.³ All of this, sometimes, honestly, it makes me want to give up.

But then I remember my niece Lily, who is 11 years old. And my niece Annabelle, who is six years old. I remember Isabel Bickers, who chases me down and hugs me with all the enthusiasm her four years old can contain, every Sunday morning. I remember all the little girls I have held in front of this baptismal font, calling them Child of the Covenant. And I want better for them. And I remember that if Jesus does not give up on us, we cannot give up on us, either.

We have an opportunity here, Church. We can speak up when something demeaning is said. We can think carefully about the language we use when we speak about God, so that our words are as inclusive and expansive as our Creator. We can believe

women when they tell us what has happened to them. We can teach our young people — and remind our older people — that the only person who makes decisions about a woman's body is that woman herself. We can work for a legal system that holds us accountable — appropriately accountable — for our actions against one another when that lesson is disregarded. We can do everything in our power to ensure that everyone feels valued and respected and loved.

Because we have an opportunity, right now and in the days to come, to tell a different story. We have an opportunity to tell *our* story. We can tell the story of a God who created men and women, both in the image of God. Male and female alike, God created us, and God called us good. We can tell the story of a God who names us and claims us as part of the beloved community, regardless of gender identity. We can tell the story of a God who embraces the Samaritan woman and the Canaanite woman, the Syrophenician woman and the hemorrhaging woman, the woman accused of adultery and the woman overcome by grief, paying no attention to the nasty reputations and assumptions the world has placed upon them. We can tell the story of a God who brings resurrection to even the darkest and deadest places, to even the most broken and hopeless situations. We can tell the story of a God who promises us a brand new day *will* dawn.

It happened a couple of weeks ago. I was standing outside at a graveside, as I often do,

and I was wearing a black suit, as I often do. The little four year old was still clinging to my mistaken pant leg when her mother rescued her. “I’m right here, honey,” she said. And she said, “This is Jenny. This is grandma’s pastor. She helped take care of her when she was sick.”

The little girl looked at me. “Did you love my grandma?” she asked me. “I did,” I said. “Very much.”

“Wanna know a secret?” she said, tugging on my pants and motioning me closer. I bent down, and she cupped her hands around my ear. “I’m glad you loved her,” she whispered. “I loved her too. Isn’t that great?”

“It is,” I whispered back. “It is the greatest thing I know.”

I have hope for the world that little girl will grow up in. I have hope that she might help usher in a bit more of the kingdom of God. That she might see the day when we can wrap our arms around one another, even the people we don’t really know, and the only stories we need to tell are the stories that remind us how much we are loved.

That is what greatness looks like. And no matter how improbable or flat out impossible it might seem, let us never give up on it.

¹As reported by NPR Morning Edition, aired October 14, 2016

²As reported by the Washington Post, October 8, 2016: www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/10/08/what-happens-when-you-ask-wom-

[en-for-their-stories-of-assault-eight-million-replies/?utm_term=.49004c206e6a](http://www.teenvogue.com/story/self-care-tips-for-sexual-assault-survivors?mbid=partner_facebook_hellogiggles)

³As reported by Teen Vogue, October 13, 2016: www.teenvogue.com/story/self-care-tips-for-sexual-assault-survivors?mbid=partner_facebook_hellogiggles

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.